Nationwide Survey of LEPC Practices

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Executive Summary

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Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) are in the midst of a major transformation of their data management practices. LEPCs around the United States are rapidly moving from paper to computer systems for managing their facility chemical inventory data of hazardous chemicals (also called EPCRA data).

Four out of every ten of the LEPCs (39%) that Americans live in have already entered the computer era -- and another four out of ten (42%) now have plans to join them. Just two in ten (18%) contend that they do not need or cannot afford to make the shift to computers.

The forthcoming computerization of LEPCs is now planned throughout all regions of the United States -- and among virtually all but the least active LEPCs. Even if some of these plans are delayed, the best evidence is that LEPCs are likely to undergo an enormous shift in their data management practices during the 1997-1999 period.

These widespread conversions are significant. When LEPCs move to computer data management, they acquire powerful new tools for utilizing the EPCRA data for emergency planning, emergency responses, hazard analysis, public information, and other applications.

These and other findings are drawn from survey data of 1,018 LEPCs. The nationwide, population-weighted poll of LEPCs was conducted in March 1997 by a research team from The George Washington University's Department of Public Administration.

Background

The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA) was part of Title III of the 1986 Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA III). It stipulated that the governor of each state appoint a State Emergency Response Commission (SERC).

Each SERC was to create Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs), with members to be drawn from such fields as public safety, health care, and local industry. Most SERCs created one LEPC for each county in the state, but there were exceptions. A few states used smaller jurisdiction s (e.g., townships) as the boundaries for LEPCs.

Also, a few states created much larger districts, encompassing many counties in each LEPC. LEPCs were required to submit an emergency response plan to their SERC. Among other things, that plan was to identify hazardous chemical storage and transportation, along with procedures for emergency response, public notification, and evacuation in the event of an accidental release, spill, or other chemical emergency.

Facilities were required to report their hazardous chemical inventory each year. Thus, the crucial element in LEPC data management is the annual facility chemical inventory data (EPCRA data).

Methodology

After sending advance notification letters, researchers from The George Washington University's Public Administration Department completed telephone interviews with leaders of 1,018 Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) in March 1997. The sample of LEPCs was drawn using population-weighting to ensure that jurisdictions were represented in approximate proportion to their population.

Without population weighting, over half of the sample of LEPCs in the fifty states would have been drawn from just four states that have numerous LEPCs -- New Jersey, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Texas. Thus, (while not repeated throughout the report) all percentage s referring to the surveyed LEPCs should be interpreted as an estimate of the percentages of the LEPCs where Americans live.

The 1997 survey builds on the 1994 George Washington University survey of LEPCs. (See William C. Adams, S. D. Burns, and P. G. Handwerk, *Nationwide LEPC Survey*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1994.)

At the customary 95% level of probability adjusted by the finite population multiplier, the completed sample of 1,018 yields confidence intervals of ±3%. However, the text does not dwell on confidence intervals because the fundamental findings do not hinge on subtle 3% margins.

Highlights

The 1997 LEPC survey may be summarized as follows:

- Compared to a 1994 survey of LEPCs, the 1997 survey detected only a modest increase in the number of LEPCs that use computers to manage their facility chemical inventory data -- 39% up from 35%.

- However, the 1997 findings reveal that a large proportion of LEPCs (42%) are on the verge of switching from paper filing to computer systems for data management. Just 18% contend that they do not need or can not afford to shift to computers.

- This anticipated surge in LEPC computerization was found throughout all regions of the United States. Currently, the Midwestern LEPCs (EPA Regions V and VII) are the most likely to use computers for data management (47%) and Western LEPCs (Regions VIII-X) are the least likely to do so (29%).

  If LEPC plans are fulfilled, much of the existing regional variation will disappear. Between 77% to 84% of the LEPCs in all US regions plan to use computers for data management.

- The 1994 nationwide survey of LEPCs found that frequency of meetings was a good predictor of LEPC activity and compliance with the mandates of SARA III.

The 1997 survey found a marked increase in meeting activity among LEPCs, suggesting a continued growth in LEPC activity. As might have been expected, meeting frequency did correlate strongly with the propensity to have or plan to have computerize the facility chemical inventory data. Yet, even among LEPCs that meet just 1-3 times a year, a majority plan to computerize the inventory data.

- Even if not all LEPCs are able to implement their planned changes, the best evidence is that LEPCs are likely to undergo a radical shift in their data management practices during the 1997-1999 period. This is a pivotal time when support and assistance is likely to be particularly important for these later adaptors.

- Most LEPC leaders consider the facility chemical inventory data (EPCRA data) to be "very useful" (44%) or "moderately useful " (43%).

- LEPCs that collect EPCRA data say that they use it for emergency response planni ng (96%), hazard analysis (91%), responding to public inquiries (89%), disseminating information to the community (85%), and, to a lesser extent, for zoning and land-use decisions (34%).

- Of the LEPCs with computer data management, 76% currently use a software program called CAMEO. Usually in addition to CAMEO, 21% use Tie r II, and 8% use LandView.

- Among their LEPC users, CAMEO is considered to be "very useful" by 69% of the LEPCs, Tier II by 57%, and LandView by 52%.

- LEPCs using CAMEO overwhelmingly do so in order to support the key activities of emergency planning (93%), emergency responses (92%), and managing chemical inventory data (91%). Rather than confining their usage to one or two software features, LEPCs find nearly all of CAMEO's features to be useful.

- The Web site for CEPPO (Chemical Emergency Preparedness and Prevention Office) is considered worthwhile by LEPC leaders who have seen it. However, only 6% of those with computers have viewed the site (http://www.epa.gov/swercepp/) in the past six months.